

Business Writing: Using Interactional Language

By Ding Jianmin

This article discusses the importance of teaching the "interactional" use of language in EFL business writing classes. I first address some common problems that result from inappropriate business communication. Then I introduce the concept of the interactional use of language as opposed to the "transactional" use of language. Finally, I propose ways to include the teaching of interactional language in EFL business writing courses.

A Sample Task

Before discussing the importance of interactional language use, I want to share a sample writing task given to EFL learners in a business English class. The class goal was to prepare students to pass a test for the Cambridge Business English Certificate (CBEC). The class consisted of about 40 students with English proficiencies ranging from intermediate to upper intermediate levels. All students had had six years of English instruction in middle schools, and many had studied for two or three years in EFL programs at colleges or universities, while some were actually English majors in their third year. The sample task follows:

You are the secretary of Mr. Bill Byers, General Manager of Holiday Inn. The following is a letter he has given you to answer, together with his comments in parentheses. Write a letter (100–120 words) replying to Mrs. Dewitt, the business administration instructor of the college. Use the information in the letter and Mr. Byers's comments.

Jackson College of Business

(Good idea. Please answer.)

Dear Mr. Byers,

I am writing to ask whether a class of 30 business students (Hotel regulations, maximum 25), aged 17 or 18, could visit your hotel for a field trip. I am a teacher of business administration, and this semester my students are studying the basic theories of hotel management.

I was wondering if we could come next week. (No—busy with the tourist group from East Asia.) If this is not possible, may I suggest Thursday the 17th (O.K. a.m.) or Friday December 18, before the holiday begins?

As my students know very little about the various kinds of jobs in hotels, they would like to talk to some employees in an informal question-and-answer session. (No, cannot release employees from duties.)

I hope it will be possible for you to arrange a visit, and I am sure it will be very helpful to the students' course work. I am looking forward to hearing from you. (Three hours maximum in hotel.)

(Note: Get confirmation of the visitors' ages —no visitors under 18.)

After 25 minutes the students came up with various answers. Here is a typical example:

I received your letter of November 16th and I think your students would benefit from a field trip in our hotel. However, because of the practical situation, there must be some changes.

As we will be busy with a tourist group from East Asia next week, you should not come then because we do not want you to disturb our work. However, December 17th will be fine, but you can only come in the morning because no one will be available to welcome you in the afternoon.

Our hotel regulations state that we cannot receive more than 25 visitors at one time, so you should ask the extra 5 students not to come. Also, as all visitors must be over 18, those aged 17 will not be welcomed.

Finally, I must tell you that you can stay in our hotel for no more than three hours, so you need to leave before noon.

As to your request to talk to our new employees, this is not possible since they are not allowed to talk to visitors during working hours.

This response was well organized, with neat paragraphing and effective use of transactional vocabulary, and almost error-free in grammar. But would the letter have the desired effect on someone receiving it in an authentic situation? The answer is most probably negative because the letter is inappropriate and offensive. First, because it contains unnecessary information, it is excessively lengthy. Secondly, the tone is unfriendly, arrogant, and rude. Therefore, it is not socially appropriate or acceptable. As a result, such a letter would cause ill feelings on the part of the receiver and damage the image of the hotel. This, of course, would be harmful to any business organization.

In fact, most of the high-intermediate EFL learners in the class evidenced social and cultural inappropriateness in their writing. Some of their letters would have caused serious damage to social relationships.

Factors such as an inadequate cultural knowledge of English-speaking nations and the ignorance of register differences may have caused the students to miss achieving the desired result in their communication. Also, the students may not be aware how the target language is used not only for exchanging information but for establishing and maintaining social relationships. It is for this reason that we should not only introduce the concept of the interactional use of language to our students, but also emphasize and practice this use of language in our writing classes.

Interactional vs. Transactional Use of Language

Language is used by people in a society to express and receive thoughts and ideas. This understanding of the function of language is, however, not necessarily derived from our own experience in using a language, but by definitions from dictionaries and linguistic books.

Yet, if we observe how we use language in our daily lives, we may find that the function is not so simple. In many cases, we do not use language to express ideas or feelings. Neither do we always use language to inform. For example, suppose we meet a colleague in the morning. We greet each other with "Good morning," "How are you?" or even "It's a fine day, isn't it?" We say these things not because we are interested in the information about each other's health or want each other's opinions about the weather. Similarly, when we write thank-you letters, love letters, or Christmas or birthday cards, our primary intention is not to give information. So what are the main purposes of our using language, spoken or written, in these cases? The answer is "to establish and maintain social relationships," a function of language termed the interactional use of language by Brown and Yule (1983:1).

Brown and Yule use two terms to describe the major functions of language— transactional and interactional. Transactional language is used to convey content; interactional language is used to maintain social relationships and express personal attitudes. Following this division, Brown and Yule further label "the language which is used to convey factual or propositional information as primarily transactional language" (1983:2). It is assumed that in using primarily interactional language, what the speaker (or writer) has primarily in mind is the efficient establishment or maintenance of social relationships; language used in such a situation is primarily "relationship oriented."

However, as Brown and Yule point out, the division of transactional and interactional language is "an analytic convenience," and "it would be unlikely that, on any occasion, a natural language utterance would be used to fulfill only one function, to the total exclusion of the other" (1983:1). In fact, the two language uses are always interwoven, generally with equal importance in spoken and written communication. It is for this reason that we are emphasizing the necessity of making students aware of the interactional use of language in business writing, even though the primary use of language in business writing is, as many would think, transactional rather than interactional.

Interactional English in Business Writing

While the use of transactional language is a prominent feature in written language, the use of interactional language is often associated with conversations—where language is used to open, close, and maintain conversations. Business writing such as letters, memos, reports, and so forth, is naturally thought to be message oriented, with the aim of requesting or providing information to carry out business dealings. However, even in business writing, the interactional use of language can be of vital importance because a good relationship is a prerequisite in business transactions.

For example, because of his use of offensive language, the student writer in the sample task would have failed to establish a good relationship with the school. Although all the necessary information had been provided and the hotel was actually willing to host the visit, the school

instructor would most probably have turned away from this hotel and sought a more cooperative hotel, thus destroying the hotel's possibility of doing other business with that school in the future. To avoid undesirable results, writers of business letters should be aware of the fact that while they are requesting or providing information, they are also establishing or maintaining social relationships.

Cooperative Principle and Politeness Principle

To ensure correct use of interactional language, I would like to propose the application of two principles, the Cooperative Principle (CP) and the Politeness Principle (PP), which were explained by Grice (1975) and Leech (1993). These two principles are applicable to business writing—especially the business letter—because they share the basic features of conversation in that they both involve two or more parties for the exchange and communication of thoughts and feelings.

Cooperative Principle

In his discussion of the implications of conversation, Grice states that talk exchanges are characteristically "cooperative efforts" in which each participant recognizes a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction. To achieve this, Grice presents the following four criteria in applying the Cooperative Principle:

Quantity: Make your contribution as informative as required, but do not offer more information than is required.

Quality: Do not make false statements or make claims for which you lack adequate evidence.

Relation: Be relevant.

Manner: Avoid obscure expressions and ambiguity. Be brief and orderly.

Politeness Principle

Based on his observations, Leech (1993) proposes the PP, which accounts for certain conversational behavior that CP does not satisfactorily explain. Leech further suggests that while the CP regulates what we say, the PP maintains the social equilibrium and the friendly relations which enable us to assume that our interlocutors are being cooperative.

Application of the CP and the PP in Business Writing

So far I have discussed the CP and PP as they apply to conversational behavior and oral communication. However, the two principles can be used in business writing to ensure the effective exchange of information and the successful establishment or maintenance of social relationships. I again refer to the writing task described above. In applying the CP and the PP to the letter written by the student, we find that it violates the principles in several ways.

First, the letter violates *quantity* by providing more information than is required. For example, it includes the information about that "tourist group from East Asia" (paragraph 2), which is not by any means the receiver's concern. While giving negative responses to the inquiries, it also adds unnecessary information such as "no one will be available to welcome you in the afternoon"

(paragraph 2), and "those aged 17 will not be welcome" (paragraph 3). Second, the author ignored the CP relation criteria because he included information irrelevant to what the receiver wanted to know.

Third, the aspect of the letter that gives information and expresses thoughts is wordy and repetitious, thus violating the manner category. Examples of this are found where the author states "you should not come then because we do not want you to disturb our work." This can be simply omitted, as can the sentences saying "so you should ask the extra five students not to come" and "those aged 17 will not be welcomed."

It must be pointed out that violating the CP is not simply a matter of inefficiently communicating information; it also affects the successful establishment or maintenance of social relationships—largely because a letter with unnecessary information, irrelevant details, and redundant expressions is boring.

Yet the letter is far more repulsive in its violation of the PP. Instead of "minimizing the expression of impolite beliefs," it actually maximizes them by adding either unnecessary information, threatening warnings, or repugnant advice such as "we do not want you to disturb our work," "no one will be available to welcome you in the afternoon" (paragraph 2), and "you need to leave before noon" (paragraph 4). With expressions of this kind, how can the letter possibly be successful in establishing or maintaining good social relationships?

Two conclusions may be drawn from the analysis of the business letter in the light of the CP and the PP. First, the two principles are generally both at work in guiding business writing. This is because business writing combines the two uses of language with almost equal importance. Second, in actual business writing, the PP in the interactional use of language often plays a dominant role because the basic rule is that "unless you are polite to your neighbor, the channel of communication between you will break down, and you will no longer be able to borrow his tools" (Leech 1993:82). This is the very reason that awareness of the interactional use of language is of vital importance for business writers and why the CP and PP may be desirable principles to apply in this genre of writing.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have discussed the importance of the interactional use of language in social communication, especially in business writing. I have also discussed the lack of awareness of how to use this language by many EFL learners and the undesirable consequences caused by its omission. Therefore I introduced the CP and the PP as general principles which can ensure effective communication in writing. Neglect of the interactional use of language, however, is found not only among EFL learners of business writing but unfortunately among most of the general students of foreign languages as well.

It is hoped that this article has not only shown the importance of the interactional use of language, but has also promoted the teaching or training of this language use in EFL programs. With both interactional and transactional uses of language emphasized, learners should be able to develop the language skills that are acceptable, appropriate, and effective in social communication.

References

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